# Viewpoint: Replacing the Roadside Indian

Faith Roessel

## *The Tourism Challenge in Indian Country*

*Faith Roessel*

Going back home for the holidays to visit my family on the Navajo Nation I have to pass through a reservation border town with a chestnut brown, smiling Indian looking down from his sign above, welcoming me to the "Indian Capital of the World." Farther on, I approach another well-worn familiar sign, this one welcoming me to "Navajo land."

I grew up on the Navajo Reservation, living on lands that we took for granted, but millions came to see. I became adept while driving near my home at avoiding not only the wandering sheep or cows grazing alongside the road but also the wandering tourists who had abandoned their cars, searching for the perfect photograph of my backyard-the spectacular Round Rock.

I now live in Washington D.C. but the images of Navajo land still enter my living room at night when I turn on the TV and see Madison Avenue is peddling yet another product with the stark, red buttes of Monument Valley as a backdrop. Monument Valley is becoming a national image as readily identifiable as the Washington Monument or the White House. I feel ambivalent about this, proud of my people and land, yet not wanting its uniqueness and sacredness marred by outsiders.

In my current position as Special Assistant to **Bruce Babbitt**, the Secretary of the Interior, I work with Department officials on tourism initiatives. The Madison Avenue images of my homeland are a constant reminder of the dilemma facing tribes—whether, how, and to what extent to develop tourism on their lands. For some tribes, tourism is a catalyst to stimulate the tribal economy by creating jobs, attracting private investors, and correcting infrastructure deficiencies.

For other tribes, tourism is heavily regulated with strict control over access to tribal cultural and natural resources. And some tribes simply decline to promote tourism. For all tribes, most importantly, tourism is a means to educate the public about themselves through their own voices.

Indian lands are not public lands. While Americans may feel entitled to visit reservations, these lands are not national parks. Indian lands are subject to the local laws of the tribes. How a tribe promotes or regulates tourism is a fundamental exercise of its self-governance. When you enter Indian country, you are entering that tribe's "home" and should behave accordingly, being respectful of the host tribe's way of life.

Although there is no official "Federal Indian Tourism" policy within the Department, **John Garamendi**, the deputy secretary who leads Interior's efforts to develop a public lands tourism strategy, encourages tribal participation. As he observes, "When we travel to points across our country, which visitor doesn't ask who was here first? Indian lands are largely untapped and undeveloped destination points for the domestic and international traveler who wants a sense of an authentic American experience." Federal agencies ought to include tribes in current discussions on tourism, travel, and recreation, and they should be encouraging tribes to interact and have access to the expertise housed in each agency.

More tribes and Indian entrepreneurs are entering the tourism market. And they recognize the need for state-wide or regional Indian tourism organizations similar to the new and active organizations of the **Arizona American Indian Tourism Association** and the **Alliance of Tribal Tourism Advocates**. While useful to the tribes and Indian business owners, these fledgling organizations may be even more useful to the non-Indian community desiring to do business with Indian country.

For example, state agencies planning to market tribes and tribal destination points; tour and bus operators, hotel chains, or restaurateurs interested in co-venturing with tribes and Indian entrepreneurs; or tourists who want maps and guidebooks with a tribal perspective. These Indian tourism organizations are at the cutting edge of forging understanding and partnerships with tribal, local, state, and federal governments and private industry; and the demand is there for more.

By engaging in the growing dialogue on tourism, tribes can begin defining who they are, on their own terms, and how they wish to tell outsiders about themselves and their lands. Those decisions embody the three essential goals for every tribe: self-determination, empowerment, and survival. Self-determination is being able to set your own direction on tourism through policies, laws, and programs. Empowerment is having tribal members carrying out those tourism policies and programs for the benefit of the members and the community. Survival is knowing that the choices made will ensure that a tribe's culture, language, and traditions are practiced, respected, and continued.

Visits home remind me of how much beauty lies in Indian lands and within the people, but they also remind me of the challenges ahead. Maybe one day we will have the economic strength to define our image, rather than face, day-to-day, the road-sign Indian that reinforces a stereotype of us beyond our control.

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# Secretary Commends Roessel

Secretary Babbitt commended **Faith Roessel**, who resigned from the Department on February 10, for her dedicated service to Interior and her contributions to its Native American initiatives.

"Faith has assisted me greatly in her counsel on Indian issues and helped create an interagency Working Group that is productive and result-oriented," said Babbitt. "She has taken on some tough issues for the Department and I will miss someone of her caliber and dedication."

As a special assistant to Babbitt, Roessel had responsibility for issues that included military base closures involving Indian tribes, environmental justice, tourism, and tribes.

Roessel staffed the White House Domestic Policy Council's Working Group on American Indians and Alaska Natives, which Secretary Babbitt chairs. Roessel served as a liaison to the agency cochairs of the Working Group's five subgroups to help develop their plans on interagency collaboration. Their efforts included protecting the environment and natural resources that affect Indian people and lands; promoting reinvention opportunities to better serve Indian tribes; improving consultation between federal agencies and tribes; strengthening educational opportunities for Indian youths and adults; and recognizing and preserving Indian religious freedom.

The Working Group, created at the urging of Secretary Babbitt, is a focal point in coordinating and carrying out President Clinton's policies toward tribal governments. The President signed two executive orders originating from the Working Group.

Prior to her current position, Roessel was the Interior Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. In Washington, D.C., Roessel has served as the director of the Navajo Nation Washington Office, senior staff attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, and legislative assistant for U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico.


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